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ABSTRACT

The information presented in this booklet is for group leaders, facilitators, and members, and outlines some typical barriers or problem situations groups encounter. These are (1) reluctance to assume responsibility for tasks, (2) a decline in attendance, (3) unproductive, time-consuming meetings, (4) lack of followup on decisions, (5) discussions that are dominated by a few members, and (6) conflicts among members. Several tactics and activities are presented to help groups limit or remove these barriers. (Author/MLF)

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Keys to Community Involvement Series

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KEYS TO COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

GROUP PROGRESS:
RECOGNIZING & REMOVING BARRIERS

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ABOUT THE SERIES

Keys to Community Involvement is a series of booklets developed for governing boards, community leaders, group members, administrators and citizens. The booklets are designed to help these audiences strengthen their skills in group processes, work cooperatively with others, and plan and carry out new projects. Topics include techniques to maintain enthusiasm in a group, ways that agencies can effectively use consultants, and factors that affect introducing and implementing new projects.

The booklets are written by members of the Rural Education Program of the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory. The Laboratory is a nonprofit, educational research and development corporation, headquartered in Portland, Oregon.

The booklets in the series are adapted from a much more comprehensive set of materials and training activities developed and field tested by the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory over the past several years in dozens of locations throughout the western United States.

Information about other booklets in this series--titles and how to order--as well as information about related services--training, workshops and consultation--can be found on the inside and outside back covers of this booklet.

INTRODUCTION

Periodically groups of all kinds get bogged down or run into difficulties. However, such difficulties can be viewed as a positive learning experience. If group members are skilled in recognizing the difficulties and are aware of methods to overcome them, improved group cohesion and productivity can result.

The information presented in this booklet is for group leaders, facilitators and members, and outlines some typical barriers or problem situations groups encounter. These are:

1. Reluctance to assume responsibility for tasks
2. A decline in attendance
3. Unproductive, time consuming meetings
4. Lack of followup on decisions
5. Discussions that are dominated by a few members
6. Conflicts among members

To help your group limit or remove these barriers, several tactics and activities are presented. You can use them as they are described or modify them to address the unique needs of your group.

PROBLEM SITUATIONS AND HOW TO HANDLE THEM

MEMBERS ARE RELUCTANT TO ASSUME RESPONSIBILITY FOR TASKS

Most groups are organized to accomplish tasks. For example, a citizens group may be established to help the school board identify, plan and carry out school improvement projects. Or a temporary task force might be set up to plan a staff retreat.

Getting the work done depends on the willingness of members either to do the work themselves or to assume the responsibility for getting work done by coordinating and delegating specific tasks to others.

Sometimes a group may be faced with plenty of work but few members who want to do it. There may be many reasons for this, including:

- Members don't feel committed to the tasks
- Members feel they will fail or won't do the work "right"
- Tasks seem vague and confusing
- Members don't think there are adequate resources--people, time or money--to successfully complete the tasks

If your group realizes it is facing this kind of situation, try the following activities to identify more clearly what is causing the situation and how to resolve it.

A. Review the purpose and goals of the group. Some members may not see the relationship between the work that is to be done and the reason they joined the group. Reviewing the purpose and goals of the group may help clarify the relationship and increase motivation for doing the work.

B. List the tasks on a chalkboard or newsprint so all members can see them. Clearly listing what is to be done and breaking the work down into small, manageable tasks frequently helps reduce members' confusion and anxiety about what is to be done and who is responsible for doing it. Also, if members feel unsure about their abilities to accomplish the tasks, listing the tasks may help members select the ones they feel confident about doing.

C. Surface concerns. By taking time to periodically identify and deal with members' concerns and questions, a group can eliminate some of the blocks that may be preventing them from getting their work done. A simple procedure for surfacing concerns is for each member to list on a card or slip of paper any concerns or questions about the group's work. Then, in small groups (three to four people; meeting in small groups gives shy members a greater opportunity to voice their concerns) members can share their concerns and questions, record them on newsprint and post the newsprint sheets for the entire group to read. The convener or leader of the group then helps the group address each item. Some concerns may be dissolved by a member sharing some new information; other items may require that the group make a decision or do some additional problem solving. (See Booklet 3, "Problem Solving: A Five-Step Model.") After members' concerns have been dealt with, review the tasks and agree upon task assignments.

ATTENDANCE IS DECLINING

When a group is first organized, members are usually excited and enthusiastic about the group and its goals. Their attendance is regular and participation is lively. After a time, however, members' interest and enthusiasm may wane and attendance decline. When members first show signs of indifference or disinterest, deal with it then, not after a number have already dropped out or relationships among members have severely deteriorated.

Apathy or disinterest among members can be the result of a number of things, including:

- Members may feel unwanted or not included in the group
- Members may be unhappy or disgruntled with the way the group operates; e.g., the pace is too slow or fast, or decision-making procedures seem unclear or inconsistent
- Members may feel powerless to influence final decisions
- Members may have lost interest in what the group is doing
- Members' individual goals are in conflict with what the group has outlined as its goals

There are a number of ways to identify and deal with members' apathy. One way to pinpoint some trouble spots is for members to complete the following questionnaire.

Sample Questionnaire

GROUP ASSESSMENT FORM

Directions: Below are some statements regarding your group. Please give your opinion about the items by circling the appropriate number and responding in your own words.

1 = Strongly agree
2 = Agree
3 = Undecided
4 = Disagree
5 = Strongly disagree

About the group	SA	A	U	D	SD
1. Members get along with one another	1	2	3	4	5
2. Members openly share their ideas and feelings	1	2	3	4	5
3. Important decisions are made reasonably and quickly	1	2	3	4	5
4. Problems are diagnosed and resolved in a systematic way	1	2	3	4	5
5. Members seem enthusiastic and interested about accomplishing tasks	1	2	3	4	5
6. Meetings are productive and efficient	1	2	3	4	5
7. The relationship between the group's goals and tasks is clear	1	2	3	4	5
8. The group has norms or standards that are clear and generally accepted by members	1	2	3	4	5

9. What aspects about your group do you consider most satisfying?

10. What aspects about your group do you consider least satisfying?

About myself	SA	A	U	D	SD
1. I understand the purpose and know what the agenda is for our meetings	1	2	3	4	5
2. I am generally friendly and supportive of other members	1	2	3	4	5
3. I have adequate opportunities to share my ideas and opinions with others	1	2	3	4	5
4. I feel I am a valuable member of this group	1	2	3	4	5
5. I clearly understand and feel committed to the work and tasks of this group	1	2	3	4	5
6. I am satisfied with the amount of influence I have on what happens in this group	1	2	3	4	5
7. I am able to influence and participate in making group decisions	1	2	3	4	5
8. I am satisfied with the type of leadership provided by our convener	1	2	3	4	5

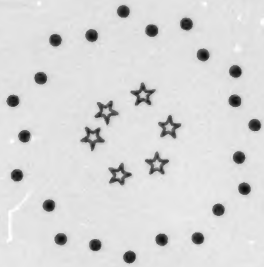
9. What aspects about your participation or influence in the group do you consider most satisfying?

10. What aspects about your participation or influence in the group do you consider least satisfying?

Figure 1. Sample Group Assessment Form

Once all members have completed the questionnaire, the leader or a member can compile the data and present it to the group. A discussion of the data may indicate potential problem areas or conflicts that members may want to work on.

The fishbowl is another technique that can be used to encourage members to talk about and examine some possible causes of apathy or dissatisfaction. In the fishbowl, a small group is formed within an enclosing circle by the full group.



The small group is then asked to discuss a question, such as "Several people have complained that our meetings are boring. What are we doing or not doing that is causing people to feel bored?" One or two empty chairs can be available in the inside circle for observers to join the activity on a temporary, rotating basis--to make a comment, ask for a point to be clarified, offer additional information and so on. The fishbowl is a way to get members talking and listening to one another when they are faced with a problem.

Pep talks and other similar techniques may have some short-term effects but are not generally satisfactory ways to deal with group indifference. Such techniques address symptoms rather than causes.

It is easier to prevent enthusiasm and interest from waning than it is to recapture group morale once it has begun to deteriorate.

Use of the following procedures may help prevent this problem.

A. At the beginning of each meeting, state the purpose of the meeting and review the agenda. Give members an opportunity to modify or add to the purpose and agenda.

B. Periodically surface any questions or concerns that members might have--and deal with them as soon as possible.

C. Keep meetings fun and active. Group work doesn't have to be hard and agonizing to be effective.

D. Encourage all members to be involved and to participate in the activities. Communicate to each member that his or her involvement is important to the group.

UNPRODUCTIVE, TIME CONSUMING MEETINGS

Most group members are busy people who have little time to waste, particularly for meetings. They usually come to meetings to get something done. When meetings begin to run overtime regularly or people feel that little is being accomplished, members frequently become frustrated and angry.

Unproductive meetings can be the result of several factors:

- No agenda or plan for the meeting
- Long, rambling discussions
- Inability of the group to make decisions or reach agreements

- Too many activities are planned for the time available

- Recurring conflict or disagreement among members

Since it is more efficient to prevent meetings from becoming unproductive than to cure the malady once it occurs, three procedures can be used to help keep meetings flowing and productive:

A. Establish an agenda for each meeting. It serves as an effective tool for:

- Identifying issues to be covered

- Checking progress throughout a meeting

- Keeping a record of what was done

- Insuring followup on each item discussed

At the beginning of a meeting, present the agenda and have members review it. Go over the agenda to make sure everyone understands each item. Check to see if any important items of business have been omitted or need to be added. Next, determine the top priority items and number them accordingly. Finally, estimate the amount of time each item will require.

Items on the agenda are likely to be varied--some will involve sharing information, others will involve identifying problems, seeking solutions, pooling ideas and assigning responsibilities. An item that calls for a decision or resolution will probably take longer than one designed merely to provide information. Review the time estimates and determine the length of the entire meeting.

The sample form below shows how one group developed its agenda. If necessary, modify the sample to fit the needs of your group.

SAMPLE AGENDA

Franklin School Staff Meeting

Date: April 24

Convener: Randy

	Item	Action	Time	Followup
(2)	Smoking	Enforcement policy	20 min.	Harriet & Joel plan student info sessions
(1)	Inservice Training	Present options & begin planning	30 min.	Josie with Rita
(3)	Spring Prom	Progress report - questions & answers	15 min	Sandra continue coordination
(4)	Meeting Evaluation	Assess meeting	10 min	

As the meeting progresses, have a recorder or secretary keep track of followup steps. Use the followup column on the Sample Agenda to record who is taking responsibility for an item and what the plan of action is. If policy is generated, state what it is.

B. Keep discussions moving and on target. All members--not just the group leader--are responsible for the conduct as well as the quality of the discussion. Each member can help keep discussions purposeful and productive by:

- Monitoring the discussion and informing the group when it strays from the item at hand
- Attempting to prevent one or two participants from dominating the discussion
- Asking people to clarify what is being discussed in order to be sure that everyone understands one another
- Drawing all participants into the discussion by frequently soliciting opinions and information from everyone concerned
- Helping the group use agreed-upon procedures, e.g., each member, in turn, shares his or her position and then the issue is open for 10 minutes of general discussion
- Occasionally verifying that group members are satisfied with their decisions and the way they are being made
- Bringing out all sides of the topic to insure that the group has considered all aspects before a decision is made.

At the close of a discussion, check to be sure that everyone who wanted to participate has had a chance to do so.

C. Clarify pending decisions and decision-making procedures. Groups make a lot of decisions--some minor and some that are more significant. Members can help prevent the group from getting bogged down when they have decisions to make by:

- Paraphrasing or stating the proposed decision that is before the group: "It has been proposed that we adopt the Distar Reading Program for all the district's elementary schools."
- Stating the procedure that is going to be used to make the decision--consensus, majority vote, etc.
- Restating the decision after it has been made, testing to make sure all members understand it and outlining the next steps to implement the decision.

LACK OF FOLLOWUP ON DECISIONS

Sometimes a group makes its decisions with ease; they are made quickly and with few objections or questions from members. Occasionally, however, the time comes--or passes--for the decisions to be implemented, and nothing happens.

Several reasons might be the root of this problem situation. For example:

- Members fear or are unsure about the consequences of a decision
- Members feel the decision is unimportant or insignificant

- Members don't feel they've been appropriately included in making the decision and, therefore, lack the commitment for carrying it out

- Members don't understand how to implement the decision; they don't know what to do first, second and so on

The key to turning this situation around is communication. In order to determine what is blocking implementation and what can be done to remove the blocks, members must be willing to deal openly with the problem.

One method, called force-field analysis, can be used to identify the conditions that support and those that block implementation of a decision.

Use the following steps to conduct a force-field analysis:[1]

A. Clearly state the goal or desired situation; in this case it would be the decision that is to be implemented.

B. Identify the situation "as it is."

C. Brainstorm the forces which support goal attainment.

D. Brainstorm the forces which prevent you from changing the present situation.

E. List the blocking forces in order of the most significant obstacles.

F. Brainstorm possible solutions to this prioritized list of obstacles.

G. Create an action plan based on the solutions generated.

SAMPLE FORCE-FIELD ANALYSIS

A. Statement of the Goal:	To plan a staff retreat
B. The Situation:	Nothing has been started (and the decision was made two weeks ago)
C. Forces For • The retreat was a consensus decision • There are some important issues that must be dealt with by the staff • There is money in the budget to cover staff time for planning	D. Forces Against • Work pressures limit planning time • Few people seem interested in serving on the planning committee • No one seems to know what the planning tasks are
E. Prioritize Forces Against:	1. No one seems to know what the planning tasks are 2. Work pressures limit planning time 3. Few people seem interested in serving on the planning committee
F. Possible Solutions:	Have someone who worked on last year's retreat committee help this new committee get started
G. Develop an Action Plan:	In order to clarify planning tasks for the staff retreat, we will (1) use last year's retreat program as a guide, and (2) ask Joan, a member of last year's staff retreat committee, to help us outline major tasks

Figure 2. Sample Force-Field Analysis

Once a decision has been made, the following steps may help to ensure that the decision will be carried out.

- Identify some action steps to get some work or activities started.
- Decide who will carry out specific action steps.
- Set a time when a progress report will be made to the entire group.

DISCUSSIONS ARE DOMINATED BY A FEW MEMBERS

Much of the business and work of a group is accomplished through oral exchanges or discussions among members. And since some people are naturally more vocal than others, it is inevitable that a few will have more "air time" during meetings than others. For some groups this may not be a problem, as the more silent members may feel quite comfortable communicating many of their ideas and opinions on an informal basis--during coffee breaks, over the telephone between meetings, or in brief hallway conversations.

However, members who do dominate group discussions may not be aware of the needs of others nor of the impact of their domineering behavior which may result in the following:

- Pertinent ideas or information, important for a decision, may not be stated
- A tense, combative atmosphere may emerge
- Less assertive members begin to feel expendable and unimportant and may eventually quit the group
- Members may not be able to express genuine support for good ideas or offer constructive criticism

When it becomes obvious that discussions in which only a few are participating have become dysfunctional to the group, you can suggest using one of the following procedures.

A. High talker tapout. The primary purpose of the "high talker tapout" is to prevent discussion being dominated by any one person in a group and to allow all members to actively participate during a meeting.

To carry out this activity, someone needs to be designated as a monitor. The monitor watches to see if anyone seems to be dominating--if two or three people seem to be doing all the talking or if certain members have exceeded the number of minutes that were designated for stating one's opinions.

The next step is for the monitor to notify the "high talker." This can be done in a number of ways. One way is to hand the person a card with directions on it, i.e., "Please refrain from making any further comments until the group moves on to a new topic or agenda item," or "Please refrain from making any further comments for five minutes. I'll tap you on the shoulder when your time is up." Taking another approach, the monitor can place a token in front of a high talker--this might signify to stop talking for a certain period of time or until everyone in the group has contributed to the discussion at hand.

When using this activity, it is important that the group understands the role of the monitor and what a high talker is to do (or not to do) once notified by the monitor.

B. Buzz groups. This is another technique to broaden participation and discussion. Small groups of three to five members are formed to discuss the concern or topic at hand. After a short period of time (two to five minutes) a member of each buzz group is asked to summarize the ideas and opinions expressed during the buzz group session and report these to the large group.

C. Surveying or polling members. In the midst of a discussion or before a decision is made, someone can request each member to indicate where he or she stands on the issue or proposal that is before the group. For example, a member might say, "I'd like to survey the group on this matter. The proposal is to hire Mrs. Alma Baker as head teacher of our elementary school. Alan, how do you feel about the proposal?" Each member in turn states his/her position. Members' statements can be as brief as "I support the proposal" or "I don't support it," or members may elaborate--"At this point I won't support the proposal for these reasons...," or "I have some questions I want to ask before I can decide one way or the other." This technique gives each member an opportunity to share his or her opinion and indicates whether or not the ideas and opinions of vocal members are representative of the rest of the group.

CONFLICTS AMONG GROUP MEMBERS

Conflicts in groups are inevitable. Each member has goals, aspirations, needs and expectations that differ--some slightly and some more significantly--from all other members. As long as these differences exist, conflict will occur.

Unfortunately, most people tend to think of conflict as negative--something that should be avoided or quickly eliminated if it does occur. But conflict has its positive side too: it can be a source of new ideas or creative solutions to tough problems.

Conflict may stem from many sources. Some of the more typical ones include:

- Value Differences. Conflict situations can emerge when members have basic differences in beliefs, attitudes and values. For example, suppose a local land-use planning group has to decide how 40 acres of land just outside the community should be zoned. It is likely that conflict will occur if some members value protection of prime agricultural land while others value industrial growth.

- Goal Differences. In some groups serious conflicts are created by divergent--and sometimes incompatible--goals among members. For example, the staff in a small company is trying to decide how to allocate some additional money that has become available. One manager wants to use the money to buy more efficient equipment to boost production and, subsequently, sales and profits. However, another manager wants to use the money to hire an engineer to improve the quality of the product which would ultimately cut costs and reduce the return of faulty items. The managers' goals at this level are incompatible, and both have made assumptions about the goals of the other person as well as the goals of the company.

- Role Pressures. In every group, particularly in work settings, members take on different roles and are expected to carry out certain kinds of activities. However, when expectations are unclear or are not commonly understood, the stage

is set for various kinds of role conflicts. For example, if a member expects the chairperson to make all final decisions and the chairperson sees decision making as the responsibility of the entire group, their role expectations differ and are in conflict.

- Perceptual Differences. Differences in how things are viewed develop because every person sees and experiences other people, events and things in a unique way. Past experiences, values and emotions act as a personal viewing screen for filtering all elements of a situation. Conflict that results from a perceptual difference is illustrated in the following example:

  Teacher: Your assignment is two days late and I am very unhappy. Why can't you get things in on time?

  Student: I wanted to do the best job and I didn't think an extra couple of days would matter--it doesn't make any difference to my other teachers.

Identifying the source of conflict can be extremely helpful when you're trying to resolve it. And once a conflict does surface, it's important to deal with it rather than avoid it. Otherwise feelings will likely fester and evolve into more dramatic conflicts or eventually cripple the group.

It should be re-emphasized that conflict is not necessarily bad. Disagreements and differences can be constructive; if members are willing to explore their differences, a clearer understanding of the problem as well as mutually satisfying and creative ways to resolve it may result.

Ways of dealing with conflict vary from person to person, situation to situation. Typically, however, people attempt to resolve conflicts by using a win-lose approach. But other methods, such as negotiating and collaborating, can also be quite effective. Each of these three methods is described below.[2]

A. Win-Lose. The win-lose approach is a struggle for one person or party to succeed, dominate or win over another. Voting, competing and fighting are all forms of a win-lose approach. In situations where there are strong differences between members' goals or values or it's a matter of the one best way, win-lose may be the only feasible approach. However, it can have some extremely adverse consequences. For example, it can lower trust among members and jeopardize group effectiveness in a number of ways--cliques may develop between the "winners" and the "losers"; open communication may diminish; or cooperation may decline among members that usually have to depend on one another.

B. Negotiating. This approach involves bargaining or compromising. Two--and sometimes more--parties discuss and trade different goals, needs and demands until a final agreement is reached. Each person or party tries to make some concessions without giving up too much of what is important. To negotiate successfully, certain elements must be present in the situation:[3]

- both parties believe they will benefit from the outcome
- each side believes the other will keep the bargain
- neither side can force the other to comply unwillingly

- each party is willing to propose ideas and work toward a solution that is acceptable to both parties

- each understands some of the constraints the other operates under

Negotiating enables you to look at alternative solutions to the conflict and work toward a resolution that maximizes the gains while minimizing the losses for all concerned.

C. Collaborating. This approach involves finding a solution that satisfies the needs and interests of all concerned parties equally well. In collaborating, people join together to share information about the underlying issue or problem, to search for common goals and needs and to seek a solution that will be mutually satisfying. The key question is, "Can we find a solution that we both accept?" not, "Who can find the best solution?"

Resolving conflicts in a collaborative manner requires a high degree of trust, open communication, and a willingness to explore ideas outside the boundaries of the conflict and people's own interests.

The disadvantages of collaborating are primarily the amount of time it takes and the energy required to build trust and explore various options.

Each of these methods for resolving conflict can incorporate systematic problem-solving procedures. The figure that follows illustrates how this can be done.

Figure 3. Resolving Conflict Using a Problem-Solving Approach

Resolving Conflict Using a Problem-Solving Approach[4]

Problem-Solving Steps	Approach to Resolving Conflict		
	Collaborating	Negotiating	Win-Lose
Focusing on the Problem	Conflict is due to misunderstanding, lack of complete information or a less than complete picture of the interest of both or all parties. Both parties join together to share information on the "problem."	Conflict is due to diverse and/or incompatible needs and values. Separately, each party examines his or her own and others' self-interests, values, needs, resources and likely approaches to the "problem."	Conflict is based on right vs. wrong or a matter of deciding one best way. Separately, each party looks at his or her own and others' strengths and weaknesses.
Searching for Alternatives	Brainstorming and other procedures are used to generate alternatives; the feasibility of identified alternatives is examined.	Different strategies are examined and one or more that seem appropriate are selected.	Different strategies are examined and the one that seems best is selected.
Planning for Action	Information about alternatives is analyzed and shared among all concerned.	Strategies are developed, the case is prepared and resources are mobilized.	The game plan is developed and practiced and resources are mobilized.
Carrying Out the Plan	Full discussion is held using all the available information; decisions are made by consensus and carried out with personal commitment for the decisions.	Parties participate in negotiations, bargaining and compromise. Each party follows through on agreements, with a monitoring process to assure compliance.	The game is played--competing, coercing, contesting, fighting. The victor's plans and decisions are carried out.
Assessing the Results	Information is shared on the adequacy of the outcomes and the procedures used to achieve the goals.	Information is shared on the adequacy of the outcomes and the process to meet self-interests. The situation is periodically reassessed.	Outcomes are compared with the original goals. The procedures to improve or to determine how to win next time are reviewed.

Some conflict situations may take a long time to work through, while other, momentary misunderstandings, may be resolved in a few minutes. However, in either case, for a group to remain an effective working body, it needs to recognize four things:

- Conflicts do occur and are legitimate.
- Individuals and groups may differ without one party being entirely right or entirely wrong.
- Conflict rarely goes away by itself. By recognizing and surfacing the conflict, participants have a greater chance of resolving issues.
- Conflict is manageable and can be dealt with.

CONCLUSION

The barriers described in this booklet are some of the more common and critical situations that can slow or bring group progress to a halt. But they can be dealt with successfully and eliminated by applying some of the suggested approaches. And the approaches described in this booklet are only a sample--you may want to modify and adapt them, generate some of your own or try others that are described in a number of other pamphlets and books listed in the bibliography.

FOOTNOTES

1. Susan Sayers, Problem Solving: A Five-Step Model. *Keys to Community Involvement* Series, No. 3. Portland, Oregon: Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, 1977, pp. 8-9

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3. Discussion Leader's Guide for the Film "Conflict." Beverly Hills, California: Roundtable Productions, Inc., 1974, pp. 15-16

4. Adapted from Gretchen Groth, John E. Lohman, Jean W. Butman and Gary J. Milczarek, "Three Approaches to Conflict," Social Conflict and Negotiative Problem Solving. Portland, Oregon: Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, 1977, p. 35

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